

## Memorial Day inspires thoughts of national service

John Burbank; News Tribune columnist

Now comes Memorial Day, nine months after Sept. 11. When I was a kid, I used to march with my Cub Scout troop in a parade to our local cemetery to honor the dead who lost their lives in war.

But in recent years, most of us have come to view Memorial Day as the beginning of summer, a welcome three-day weekend.

This year could be different. The attacks of Sept. 11 have made us all reflect upon the goodness that is our country and the patriotism that can honor all of us as Americans. And it may be a good time to reconsider what President Kennedy said 41 years ago: "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country."

The other night a national guardsman called in to talk radio. He had been patrolling the Baltimore airport, and he and his buddies had thought that it might do us good if all Americans spent some time serving their country, in the military, in AmeriCorps, in VISTA, in yearlong commitments to our communities.

Think about it: We could institute a new patriotic ritual of growing up, of becoming an adult. Every 18-year-old would have to put in a year of public service, either in the military or in the community.

Just as youth gain the right to vote and to fully exercise their citizenship, public service would be a rite of passage into adulthood. It would enable our youth to build our democratic society. All youth coming of age would be giving back and, in so doing, realizing that their lives are not to be lived just for themselves, or for the business where they work, but also for their family, their community and their country.

A year of paid public service would do all our kids good. The military is one indispensable pathway of service. President Bush's USA Freedom Corps offers another avenue for public service, as does AmeriCorps.

For example, the Washington Reading Corps Program is a statewide literacy program in which members tutor students who are having trouble learning to read. The Reading Corps has 45 full-time members for all of Lewis, Mason, Thurston and Pierce counties.

AmeriCorps also assigns its members to schools, recreation sites and community centers in low-income neighborhoods in Pierce County to tutor children and help their parents become functionally literate. But this work only employs 20 students.

There is a huge gap in our state that AmeriCorps could help fill. Currently fewer than 50 percent of Washington students in fourth, seventh and 10th grade are meeting the WASL writing test standards, and more than one-third of students are failing the reading test standard. What if AmeriCorps members were placed as teacher's aides or tutors in elementary school classrooms? It would take about 20,000 AmeriCorps members to do this.

Look around you: There are all sorts of public projects that need to be done to benefit all of us. Serving in the military, tutoring, maintaining parks, running food banks and helping with small tasks so that elderly citizens can stay in their homes are all public services that strengthen the civic society we like to know as America.

This year, 2,800 individuals are serving our state through AmeriCorps. They are paid \$800 a month. They get health care coverage. And after a year of service, they receive an educational award worth almost \$5,000 for higher education.

It is a good deal for AmeriCorps members and a good deal for the state. And it costs money. If all 85,000 18-year-olds were in public service for a year in our state, the total cost would be slightly more than \$1 billion a year.

We can figure out how to finance this if we have the political will. There is \$9 billion in leftover money from the failed Crusader artillery system. Let's reserve it for the expenditures of public service.

No one ever said that freedom was cheap and a democratic society was free. This past year thousands of our fellow citizens have paid with their lives for simply doing their jobs as Americans. On Memorial Day, let's think about what we can do for building our society and ensuring our democracy.

- - -

John Burbank, executive director of the [Economic Opportunity Institute](#), writes every other Wednesday. Write to him in care of the institute at 4738 11th Avenue NE, Seattle, WA 98105. His e-mail address is [john@eoionline.org](mailto:john@eoionline.org).


© The News Tribune


05/22/2002



[PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [USER AGREEMENT](#)  
[COPYRIGHT](#) | [ADVERTISING](#) | [CONTACT US](#)

The New Media Division of The News Tribune © 2002 Tacoma News Inc.

1950 South State Street, Tacoma, Washington 98405  253-...

Fax Machines: Newsroom,  253-...  Advertising,  253-... 

Send comments to the [Webmaster](#) at [webmaster@tribnet.com](mailto:webmaster@tribnet.com).